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BEADS IN THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN TOGO, WEST AFRICA

Pascale Nourisson
Translated by Pierre Nadon

Beads are objects of infinite diversity among the Mina-Guen of southern Togo. They accompany the people in all the material and spiritual aspects of their existence. However, while the beads serve such varied functions as ornaments, currency and emblems of wealth and prestige, they find their principal use in voodoo.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Mina-Guen area of southern Togo from 1988 to 1991. Togo is a small country located on the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa (Fig. 1). Here, as elsewhere in Africa, beads play a major role and have many uses. Their composition varies, including bone, shell, horn, wood, seeds, amber, stone and metal, but glass beads predominate.

COMMERCE IN WEST AFRICA OVER THE CENTURIES

Very early and until the 15th century, intense overland trade was conducted between the various parts of Africa. Among other products, beads arrived in the great urban centers of international trade (e.g., Bida and Kano) from whence they were redistributed to local markets. Thus, the peoples living on or near the Gulf of Guinea had access to beads from North Africa via Mauritania or Mali, cowries from the Indian Ocean, red Mediterranean coral by way of Cairo, beads made in Mauritania, Ghana (by the Krobos) and Nigeria (by the Nupes), and probably the famous "Aygris" beads made of blue coral found off the coast of Cameroon.

Following the first great European voyages of exploration of the 15th century, trade routes changed and it became more and more an ocean-going trade. Explorers and missionaries used beads and cowries as currency and gifts. The slave trade developed in the region, which became known as the Slave Coast. Prominent among the European merchandise that was exchanged for gold, ivory, palm oil and slaves were glass beads which were transported by the ships engaged in the triangular trade (Europe-Africa-North America). Venice was the principal supplier. In 1764, it exported 200 kg of beads per day and 100,000 different types were available. There were also beadmakers in the Netherlands, Bohemia and Germany, as well as lesser producers in Spain, France, Belgium and England. Each region of Africa had its particular currency and preference for certain beads. These were quickly integrated into the local cultures.

After slavery was abolished around 1850, there was a renewed interest in Africa as a source of raw materials that could fuel the economic development of Europe. A second wave of exploration began and the winds of imperialism began to blow. In 1885, Togo became a German protectorate and, after 1918, it was partitioned into two territories entrusted to France and England, respectively. In 1956, the British portion was annexed to the Gold Coast which later became Ghana. The other territory became an autonomous republic under the protection of France until 1960, when independence was proclaimed. During the colonial period, glass beads were among the merchandise of the great trading establishments such as the Compagnie Francaise de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Beads can still be used to purchase African products and pay for services rendered.

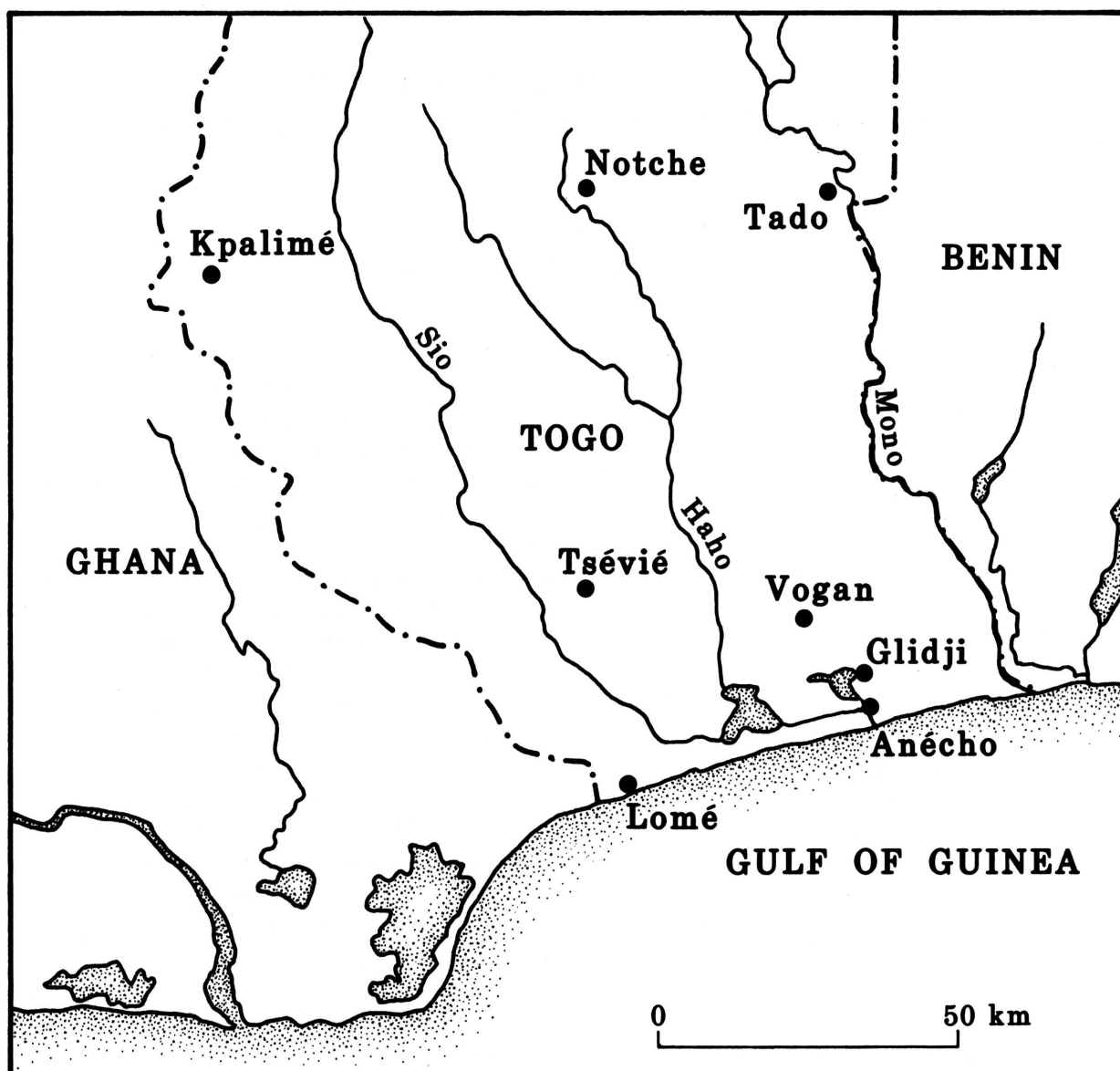


Figure 1. Map of southern Togo showing the study area (drawing by D. Kappler).

Today, the trade in beads has lost much of its importance because beads are no longer used as currency, but they are still valued, nonetheless.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

Southern Togo is a crossroads of various influences. The intermingling of groups of different origins has enabled linguistic, cultural and religious interpenetrations to gradually form a syncretic but relatively homogeneous whole.

The region has been affected by many migrations which began in the 12th century. The first group to arrive came from the east, from the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo (descendent from Ifé). They settled in Tado and formed the Adja Kingdom. Important migrations emanating from Tado began in the 14th century. The first wave settled in Notché, cradle of the Ewe, and a second wave moved southward, forming the Fon of Allada, Abomey, Porto Novo, etc. In the 17th century, the tyranny of a Notche king dispersed the Ewe groups which headed for the plateaus, the coast (Anlo,

Bê) and the southeast (Ouatchi). At about the same time, groups coming from Ghana (Fontis from El Mina and Guen from Accra), in flight because of tribal wars, settled in Glidji. They became the Mina-Guen who mixed with the Ewe. In the 19th century, Yoruba arrived from Nigeria, and Fons, Plas and Pedas came from Benin. Moreover, former slaves, liberated from Brazil, came back to establish the great families of Anecho. This intermingling of peoples has been facilitated by the lagoon system, the rivers and the sea.

THE PRESENT-DAY BEAD TRADE IN TOGO

Nowadays, the trade in beads is handled mainly by three categories of merchants:

1) Specialized Hausa traders who supply themselves in the great manufacturing and transit centers or in the villages where old women sometimes sell them their treasures. Most have stalls in the large market at Lomé (Fig. 2) where there are beads that are very varied, often old, rare and costly, and purchased by foreign collectors and some native dealers.

2) Female bead dealers that furnish vendors specializing in the sale of cult objects or the voodoo worshippers directly. Their stalls are also in the great market at Lomé (Pl. IIIA) and here may be found some old beads of European origin, many Ghanaian powdered-glass beads and some multicolored beads in 500-g bags from Czechoslovakia. Certain dealers have stalls in the city.

3) Small displays (*atekbans*) that group together everything that is used in the voodoo cult, including beads, that belong to women of Yoruba origin (Pl. IIIB). The impressive number of these stalls reveals the importance of this religion. The *atekbans* sell only beads that are used in the cult (about 50 types with their vernacular names) already strung in bracelets or necklaces for a specific use or for a specific god.

THE RELIGIONS OF SOUTHERN TOGO

Voodoo forms a coherent, very structured and very dynamic system, but with many local variations. There are influences from the east (the Orishas cult) and from the west (the five-foot throne of the Ashanti). To these may be added the beliefs akin to

the Adjas of the Tado: the cult of the *Tros*. For these people, the cosmos is a set of forces that can be captured, directed, exploited or neutralized by way of religion.

At the top of the hierarchy is Mawou, a unique, universal god who cannot be surpassed, who can be addressed directly. He is sometimes associated with Lissa, representing the female part of the Mawou-Lissa couple. Subservient to this supreme force is a myriad of gods, the voodoos. Twins and ancestors have a status similar to the voodoos. They are respected and adored. Each child that is born possesses the divine essence (*kla*) of an ancestor (*djoto*) that guides its destiny. Man tends to communicate with this invisible world as he would with his neighbors. This communication is performed through sacrifices, prayers, rites, taboos and charms.

There are symbolic representations of the voodoos and sanctuaries are built for them. Voodoos manifest themselves through possession or by means of occurrences unleashed to warn, provoke or satisfy man. Man is ignorant of the causes of events, but the gods know them and can intervene to unleash or suppress them. However, notwithstanding their power and knowledge, the voodoos look like men and live like them. They are the messengers of Mawou who created them and entrusted them to ably manage the human world and safeguard tradition.

There are many divinities and the pantheon fluctuates considerably in time and space. Some voodoos are interethnic. They consist of natural phenomena or historical/mythical persons. This is the case with the deities Heviesso, Sakpata, Dan, Mami-wata, Aziza, Egou, Legba, etc. Others are only ethnic, domestic or individual as is the case with the 41 voodoos venerated by the Guen. The voodoo is not only the composition of a force, a being or a thing, but is composed of places, times and events that constitute its legend. It covers the universe of these people. No important move, no event can take place without consulting the voodoo which determines the step to take. Religious power is held by the priests: the *hunons* who preside over the ceremonies. There are also the diviners and healers, the *bokono*. They are scholars who can, by consulting the oracles of Afa (the voodoo of human destiny), specify the causes of problems and point to solutions. Finally, there are the followers of the voodoos. Initiation takes place in a



Figure 2. Glass beads offered for sale by a Hausa trader at the great market in Lomé (photo by P. Nourisson).

convent. One may become a follower by loan, purchase, inheritance from a voodoo, or by revelation. In the latter case, Afa reveals to the person that his torment comes from a voodoo and that it will cease only if he submits entirely.

BEAD USE AND SYMBOLISM

There are many and varied uses for beads: secular, magical and religious. Beads are not only ornaments that bear witness to an individual's esthetic taste; they represent a form of communal expression and belong to the cultural realm. Their esthetic value, widely recognized and shared, contributes to making certain bead ornaments admired by all. Bracelets and necklaces are a part of all the important events of life: birth, marriage and death. *Akossou*, *gblenti*, *aglobo* (chevron) and coral beads are the most desired (Pl. IIIC). These are signs of beauty and wealth because they are becoming more and more scarce and expensive; a necklace of chevron beads now costs 100,000 F. CFA at Lomé. They are insignias of social

rank, the attributes of kings and chiefs. Persons out of the ordinary and members of important families display an abundance of necklaces and sometimes own magnificent beaded objects such as bags, scabbards, hats and boxes (Pl. IVA). Also, the ancestral five-foot throne may be decorated with beads whose number varies according to the number of slaves owned by the ancestor. Other ornaments include the strings of beads traditionally worn around the waist by young girls to hold their loin cloths. When shaken, they produce a faint sound said to be very erotic.

Even to this day, beads have retained a fiduciary value. They are part of the treasures that old women bequeath to their daughters and may be fallen back on in case of financial difficulties.

In contrast with other African countries, beads are hardly ever vested with magical or therapeutical powers in Togo. The great number of charms (*ébos*) made to ward off ill fortune and maintain or bring destiny to favorable terms rarely incorporate beads. Only one such charm, against jealousy, was observed. It was a small canvas pouch that contained a seed and a few *panzi* beads.

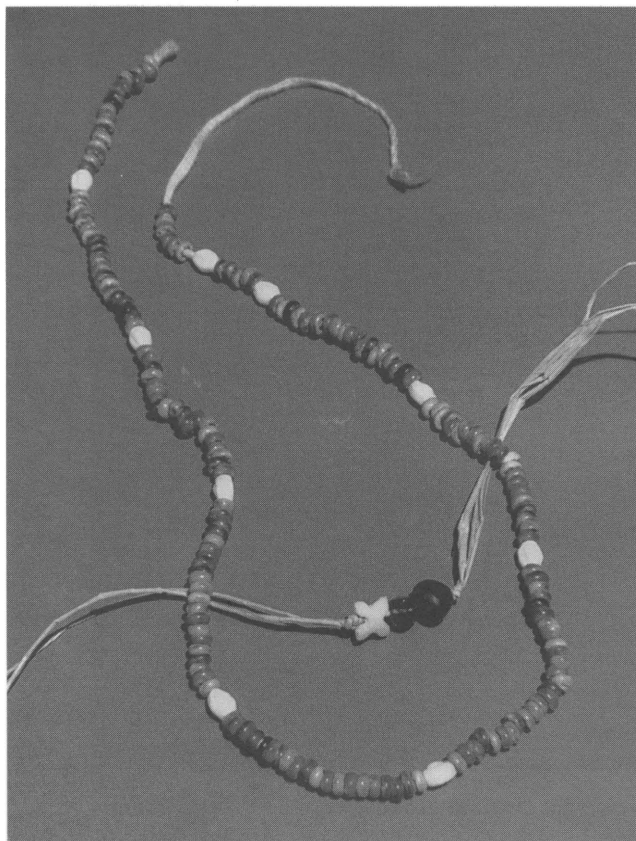


Figure 3. A necklace for twins, and a bracelet for the third child of the same sex born in sequence (photo by Philippe Ayrault).

There are, however, some occasions where particular strands possess a power of their own. There are, on the one hand, bracelets and necklaces worn by twins. Called *vénavi-djonou* (Fig. 3, long strand), they are composed of small shells mixed with white beads and cowries. They are given to the child during a special welcoming ceremony to calm and enable him to make the most of his potentiality. If one of the twins dies, a wooden statuette replaces him to restore the duality broken by death. This statuette plays the role of a living person in every day life; it is made to eat, sleep and so on. It is sometimes decorated with beads symbolizing the cultural and religious affiliation of the deceased twin.

On the other hand, when a couple has three children of the same sex in succession, the last one, reputed to be troubled or sick, must undergo a ceremony to calm or cure him. A small bracelet (Fig. 3) is made which contains three beads strung on raffia:

honkou, *afli* and a red bead (however, there are several variations). The child wears it until the string breaks.

Finally, when there have been many miscarriages or deaths of young children in one family, a belt composed of small multicolored beads is placed around the waist of the child that is born following this series of events to bring him luck and vigor.

However, it is in the purely religious field that beads are used most often. They are used at all levels of religion. They are part of the long list of objects that the novice must buy before going into the convent. Many ritual operations are necessary before the beads may be worn. The most important one is washing them in lustral water where ritual plants have macerated. Voodoo practitioners wear their complete panoply only during great ceremonies (Fig. 4; Pl. IVB). For everyday use, they only wear a bracelet or necklace that evinces their allegiance to a certain god and shows their status in the religious hierarchy. The other beads are kept in a carefully chosen, safe place. In the voodoo cult, each god is represented by an ensemble of beads. An individual bead has no significance. Thus, all the strands worn by a person must be considered, as well as the sequence of beads on each strand.

For example, the god Dan Anydohoédo (rainbow snake) is represented by *gblenti*, *ésoui*, *panzi* and *azagba* beads (Pl. IVC). A legend explains that Dan Anydohoédo lives underground, but sometimes comes out in the middle of the forest and rises in the air to plunge into the water. On the spot where he comes out of the ground, he leaves excrement which is composed of the beads just named. They are often collected by Aziza, a small facetious spirit who buries them for safekeeping. The red bead (*ésoui*) corresponds to the evil and angry side of the divinity; the blue (*gblenti*) represents its calm and benevolent side. The *panzi* and *azagba* beads, predominantly yellowish green, combine with the *ésoui* and *gblenti* beads to symbolize the colors of the rainbow. The followers of Dan also wear double-row strands of cowries around their ankles (Fig. 5).

Mami Wata, a mermaid from the sea, enjoys luxury, perfumes and the color white. In her many necklaces are found *égo*, *ouékou*, *tomé gblenti* and white beads (Fig. 6), to which can be added mosaic beads (Fig. 7).



Figure 4. Ceremony marking an initiate's exit from the convent at Glidji, Togo (photo by P. Nourisson).

For Densou, divinity of fresh water, the strands, which are very varied and colorful, must contain small red beads which are also used for the god Tohosou who protects ill-formed children.

The necklace for Heviesso, great god of thunder and lightning, is very typical. It is composed of small red beads (*hounjévé*) and two oval beads of carnelian or red glass separated from each other by a *hounsokoui* or *honkou* bead (Fig. 8, inner strand). Another form is very long and composed of pairs of cowries alternating with *honkou* beads (Fig. 8, outer strand). It is worn across the chest (Fig. 9).

As for Sakpata, god of smallpox, the strands are quite varied. Often encountered are beads whose decoration is reminiscent of the disease's pustules such as *hounsokoui* or *aholoukou*, a small black bead with white dots. These beads are usually interspersed along a three-row band of red *hounjévé* beads (Pl. VA, right). In daily life, the Sakpata worshiper may be recognized by a small modest collar in which a few centimeters of red *hounjévé* beads alternate with several centimeters of white *hounjévé* beads and are separated from each other by a *honkou* bead (Pl. VA,

right center). During grand ceremonies, the worshipers also wear a long strand of cowries and *honkou* which is similar to that of the Heviesso worshipers (Pl. VA, left).

Egou, god of iron and car accidents, requires metal beads, preferably bronze, and beads of orange carnelian (Pl. VB).

The different strands of beads may be placed around the neck, arm, wrist or waist, or worn below the knee or at the ankle. Each is then a bit different and these differences are not random. The sequence of Dan beads is not the same if they are in a bracelet as opposed to a necklace. A voodoo follower may worship many gods which increases the number of her necklaces and makes it difficult to interpret her adornments in as much as she may add some personal touch.

At the end of their initiation ceremony, the diviners wear a necklace. For those of the Afa Nago brotherhood, it consists of a *toutou-akpan* (Pl. VC) formed of small tubular beads alternating green and yellow. For those of the Afa Dziza brotherhood, it is composed of small, white *akpohé* beads. During divination, the *bokono* utilizes small symbolic objects

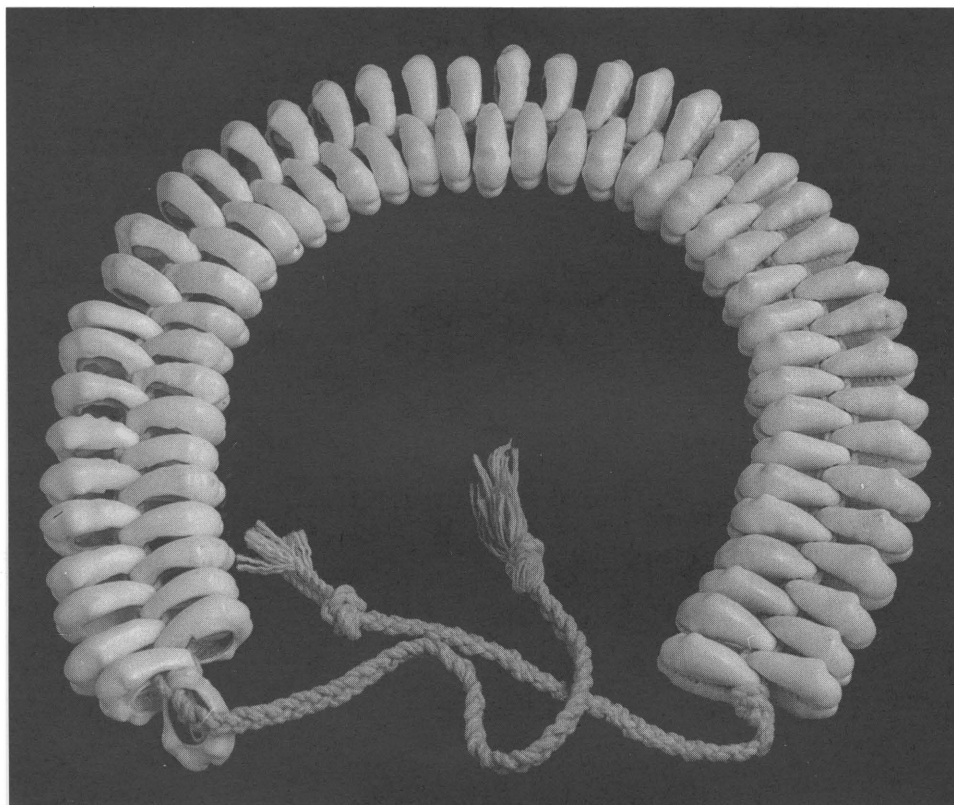


Figure 5. Anklet of cowries for the god Dan Anydohoédo (photo by Philippe Ayrault).

called *vodzis* which Afa uses to give the answers. Beads are often among the objects. A mosaic bead (Fig. 7) symbolizes woman; a bright red bead signifies sorcery, as well as envy and jealousy. Once the problem has been clearly revealed, the solution is given. It entails presenting the gods with offerings which may include beads, but only rarely. Afa may also determine the ancestor who corresponds to the child that has come to consult him. He will sometimes recommend that beads be worn. If the ancestor was a diviner, the child must wear the beads of Afa; if a slave, *azagba* beads.

Beads play an important role in the voodoo cult, even to this day. One need only attend ceremonies where the adepts literally collapse under the weight of their beads. However, old beads of European origin are becoming more scarce and expensive. They are, therefore, being replaced by others made in Ghana from salvaged glass which is crushed, molded and fired. Since the Ghanaians cannot duplicate the technology of the Europeans who made the old beads, the people have readjusted their symbolism to accommodate the new beads which bring change to their adornments and make them tricky to interpret.

CONCLUSION

A thorough study of the beads used by a people allows us to penetrate their culture and understand their system of beliefs. Beads have always been an integral part of the lifeways of the Mina-Guen who inhabit southern Togo. In the past, beads played an important part in the slave trade of this area. Today they serve as ornaments and are signs of wealth, prestige and beauty. However, they are foremost magical and religious objects that are completely integrated in the voodoo rituals of the local population.

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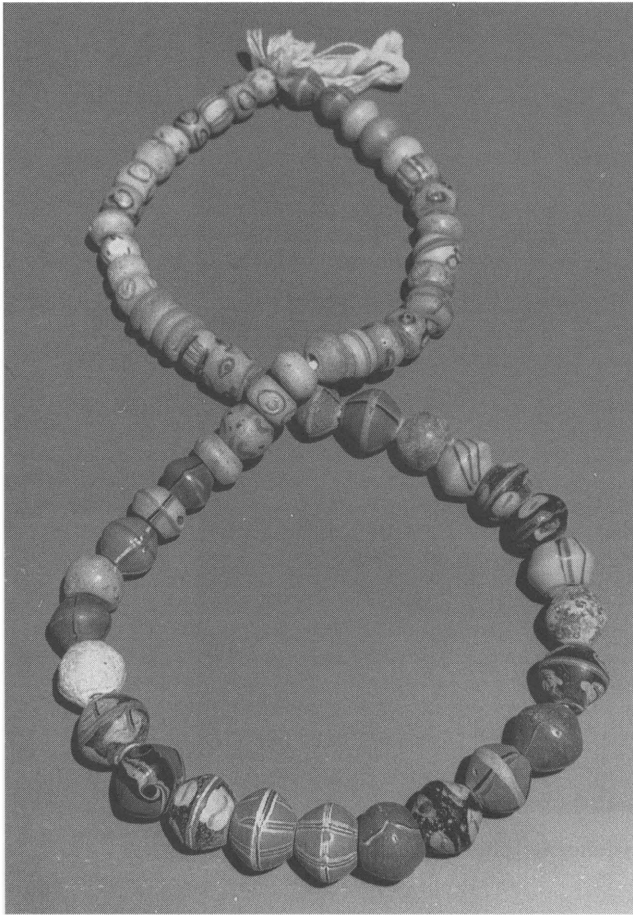


Figure 6. Necklace for the god Mami Wata (photo by Philippe Ayrault).

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Figure 7. Mosaic beads used in southern Togo (photo by P. Nourisson).

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Plate IIIA. *Togo*: Stall of a bead dealer at the great market in Lomé.



Plate IIIB. *Togo*: Atekban, a display of voodoo objects at the market in Lomé.



Plate IIIC. *Togo*: Beads utilized in the voodoo cult of Togo:

- a, *afli*;
- b, *azagba*;
- c, *gbienti*;
- d, *tomé gbienti*;
- e, *ésoui*;
- f, *agplati*;
- g, *ogba*;
- h, *alen n'kou*;
- i, *hounsokoui*;
- j, *asiakodé*;
- k, *ouékou*;
- l, *aholoukou*;
- m, *honkou*;
- n, *hounjévé*;
- o, *akpohé*;
- p, *akossou*;
- q, *égo*;
- r, *aglobo*;
- s, *végla*;
- t, *abodé*;
- u, *ananou*;
- v, *éfa*;
- w, *panzi*;
- x, unknown;
- y, *kakambé*;
- z, *nouanlivi*



Plate IVA. *Togo*: A beaded box for storing precious objects.

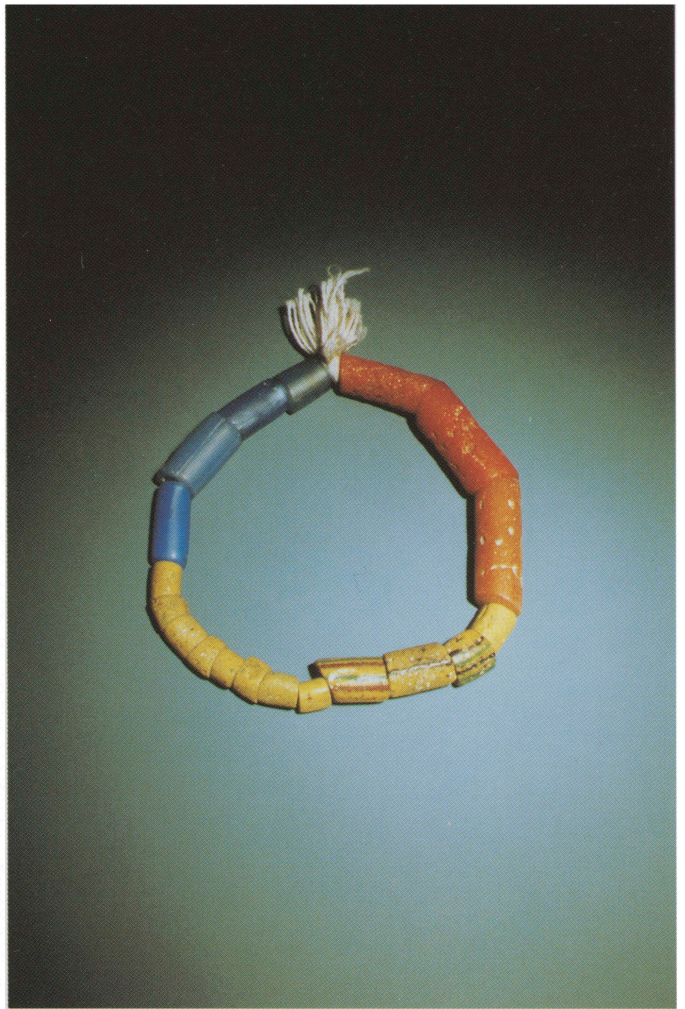


Plate IVC. *Togo*: A bracelet for the god Dan Anydo-hoédo, the rainbow snake.

Plate IVB. *Togo*: A voodoo followers' procession.



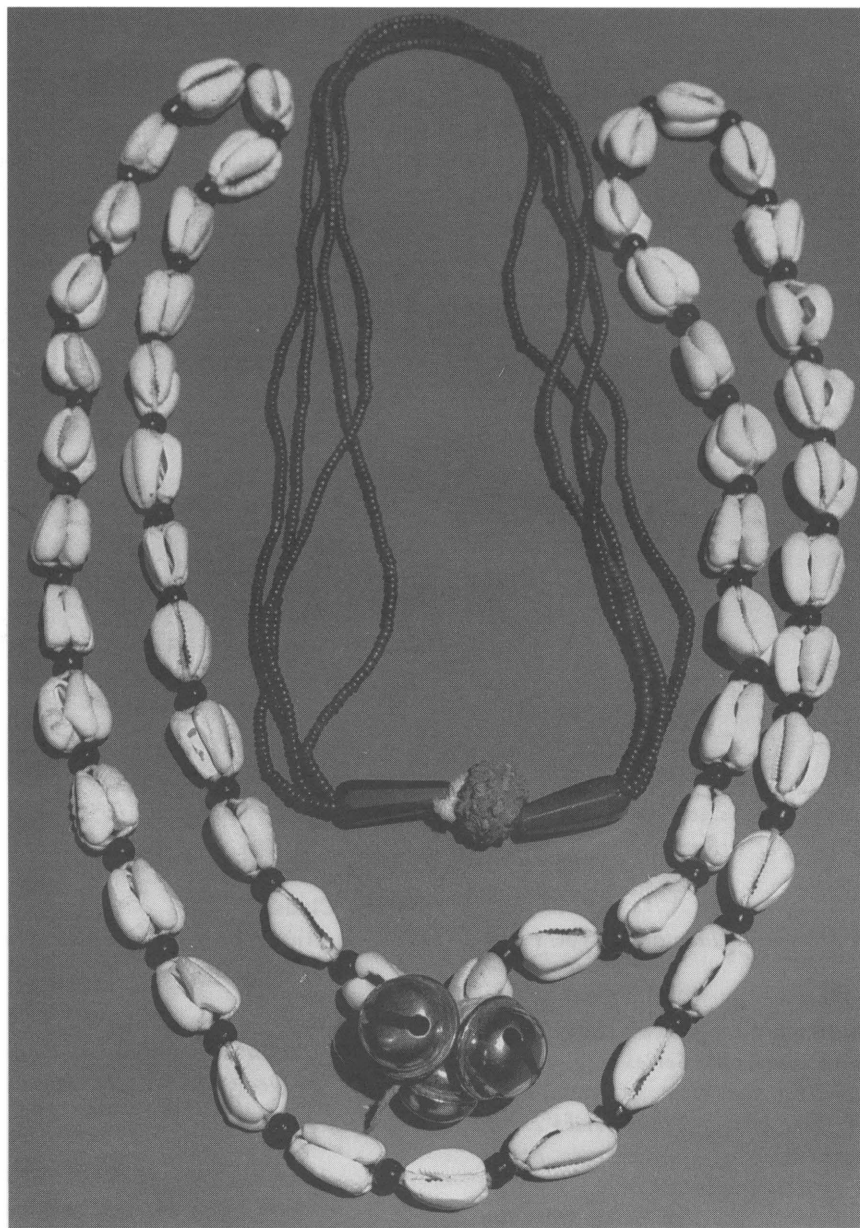


Figure 8. Necklaces for Heviesso, the god of thunder and lightning (photo by Philippe Ayrault).

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Figure 9. Ceremony for the god Heviesso near Lomé (photo by P. Nourisson).

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Plate VA. *Togo*: Necklaces for Sakpata, god of smallpox (photo by P. Nourisson).

Plate VC. *Togo*: *Toutou-akpan* — a diviner's necklaces (photo by Philippe Ayrault).



Plate VB. *Togo*: A bracelet for Egou, god of iron and car accidents (photo by Philippe Ayrault).